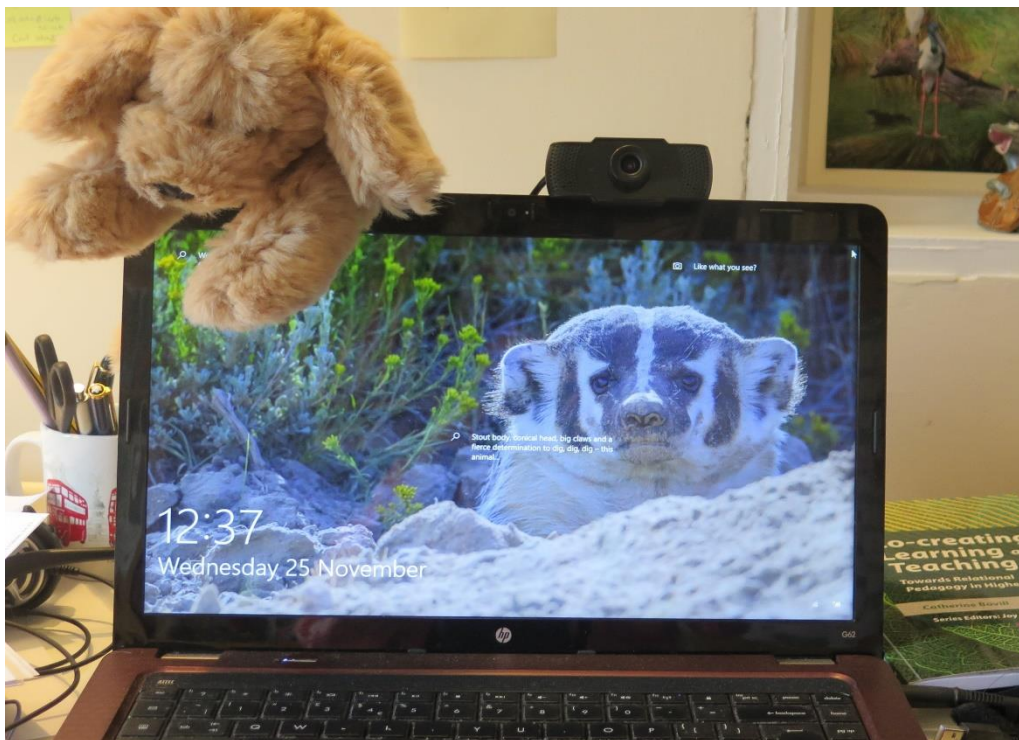


Facilitating Online Academic Conversation Clubs for first year international university students recently arrived in Britain: A tutor's reflections during COVID-19 lockdown

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Introduction

Academic conversations for international students are necessary to practise oral academic English, which may not be their first spoken or written language, as well as to discuss and exchange ideas important for all HE students.

With reference to my reflective log, this thought piece describes some of the difficulties students and tutors are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic and how tutors might plan Online Academic Conversation Clubs or similar activities to provide

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conversation opportunities for international students recently arrived in Britain. It suggests one solution, which may be beneficial in helping to create psychologically 'safe spaces' for learning online. Such 'safe spaces' involve facilitating collaborative learning environments to openly support and inspire students (Barton, 2018; Brewster, 2019).

Difficulties and complications for students and tutors

Carolan, et al. (2020) explain that the sudden necessary closure of classroom learning has led to students experiencing distress because of difficulties with computer literacy and the lack of physical contact with others.

In my reflective log, I explain:

'Recently arrived international students not only have to adjust to living in a new country and educational system, but they have only come out of quarantine two weeks ago and are sitting on their beds looking depressed. Their dreams of visiting London for the first time and making new friends in another country have been dashed- at least for the time being. In addition, the possibility to exchange ideas sitting in a library or cafe has vanished because of social distancing measures. How can I help these students to have positive learning experiences in this situation?'

Another difficulty is that some international students, despite being willing to learn, can be shy to speak in class, which in the UK might be regarded negatively (Ollin, 2008; Akinbode, 2015). Yet oral participation in conversation is important to their learning (Fromm, 2018).

Online learning and teaching require familiarity with new technology for both students and tutors, which can be challenging especially as the pandemic has meant the need to learn the relevant IT skills quickly (McKimm, et al. 2020). Nevertheless, Milovanovic, et al. (2020) believe restrictions because of COVID-19 can be transferred into some 'learning potentials'.

Planning Online Academic Conversation Clubs

My first step was to contact programme leaders in two university schools (Business and Health & Social Work) as a volunteer to ask to set up some groups. Sessions were then promoted on module sites and by email to take place outside class time as these clubs are not part of any module.

The rationale behind the conversation clubs is to support students in their academic work and provide outside class conversation opportunities. International students need to be given the chance to meet and practise their speaking in their free time (Fromm, 2018). Therefore, I decided to provide potential club members with the choice of discussing aspects of their work, for example, an academic article, an assignment brief or lecture slides. I included a general topic for conversation, which could be helpful for establishing friendships.

McKimm, et al. (2020) suggest using breakout rooms in Zoom™ in which audio and video can help group members ‘to feel safe and comfortable’, although ‘technological glitches can occur’. Nevertheless, it is important to reflect that some students may feel uncomfortable to have their videos on for cultural, religious or personal reasons. This causes difficulties for the tutor and other participants. Sometimes it is not clear if a student is there. Eye contact is necessary when communicating with and between students (Gilbert, 2016), though it is far less noticeable online. Sensitivity is important here.

To prepare for facilitating online meetings, I put the aims of the session in the chat just before the start, as these would be normally written or projected onto on the board in a classroom. At the end of each meeting, I ask students what they would like to talk about in the next session and to email me feedback and suggestions. This helps me to plan, understand students’ academic difficulties and maintains contact between the weekly one-hour sessions.

During meetings I start by talking about a general conversation topic such as ‘How might people in Britain and your country start a conversation? This ‘warmer’ should help create a friendly atmosphere and can be used while waiting for students whose devices are slow to connect. Students are then encouraged to talk about academic issues in breakout rooms and feedback to the whole group. These conversations can also be summarised in the chat and new vocabulary added.

So far students’ feedback has been positive, although I have sensed initial anxiety among a few students.

A possible solution

According to Holly and Steiner (2005), there is a need to create a psychologically ‘safe space’ in class because students may fear the risk of making errors and feeling embarrassed.

In my reflective log, I have written:

‘Fear may include discomfort because of gender, nationality, skin colour, background or other prejudice students may suffer or have experienced in the past’.

In my experience of teaching international students for many years, I have found active listening (AL) to be a helpful skill for both the tutor and the students. AL involves non-verbal communication, paraphrasing and open questions (Kuhn et al., 2018). It is widely used in therapy (Rogers, 1951), healthcare (Moss, 2017) and business (Kline, 1999). There is little research on AL in education.

In an online environment where communication is more difficult because of connection difficulties, time delay and less noticeable body and non-verbal language (Grondin, et al. 2019), the need for clarification of meaning and understanding is essential, especially in a second language. Paraphrasing and asking questions orally or in the chat of what has been said is likely to be beneficial to the conversation.

I plan to continue using this approach with my groups to see if it helps students to become less anxious and if it enables them to communicate more freely. Further reflection on how the groups are working and student feedback could help to establish how facilitating these groups may make a positive contribution to the university experience during these difficult times.

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